



# **Learner guidance and support**

Models used and staff views  
of effects on retention

West of England  
Learning and Skills Research Network

# **research report**

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# **1 Background**

This report provides the findings of the West of England Learning and Skills Research Network (WoE LSRN) project on *Learner guidance and support: models used and staff views of effects on retention*. The project's aims were agreed after consultation with the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), college managers and network members.

The reasons for low retention have been well researched. Strategies to address low retention tend to focus on curriculum development, management or student support. Little work appears to have been done on staff views on guidance and support strategies and their effects on retention. Yet their views are potentially important if the impact of guidance and support on retention is to be maximised.

We defined learner support and guidance as guidance and support addressing barriers to learners achieving their aims. In this sense, it may include help with particular personal difficulties (perhaps concerned with financial circumstances, accommodation or relationships), as well as more general aspects of learners' progress with their learning programmes, such as helping them to plan their work.

## **2 Project aims**

The project addressed the following research questions: ‘What models of delivery are used to provide learner guidance and support, and what are the views of college staff on how far this provision affects retention rates?’

The project specification identified the following aims:

- develop research capacity within the WoE LSRN area
- develop research collaboration between FE and HE institutions in the area
- collaborate with other LSRN groups and LSDA projects where appropriate
- inform current developments and understanding about the delivery of guidance and support provision within colleges
- gain staff views on what works well and what does not work well.

More specifically, the project had the following objectives:

- develop research skills within participating colleges
- explore the interface between subject-based lecturers and tutors and the guidance and support provision in their college
- identify different models for the delivery of guidance and support within colleges
- examine the views of tutors and guidance staff on how different models of guidance and support provision might improve the retention of students
- gain staff views about the comparative effectiveness of the different models identified
- identify measures of the impact of guidance and support provision in colleges.

### 3 Methodology

Four FE colleges and an HE institution took part in the project. A senior manager in each organisation agreed their participation, and identified the programme areas in which the project would take place. These were drawn from: AS/A-levels, humanities, health and social care, and Access programmes, reflecting the priorities of each provider.

A project group was established, attended by those conducting the research in each organisation, the LSDA regional director for the South West, and an LSDA development adviser. The group met five times to review progress and develop the detail of the next stages, and group members also met individually and communicated by telephone and e-mail. The project group also reported to the quarterly WoE LSRN meetings.

The following research methods were used:

- a literature search, including identification of key factors affecting retention
- mapping the models of guidance and support used by subject-based lecturers and teachers in each organisation
- semi-structured interviews with teachers and managers
- analysis of the findings.

The methodology is described in full in **Appendix 1**.

#### **Literature review**

The literature reviewed is listed in **Appendix 2**. Network members each reviewed one document and produced a short report outlining what the document revealed about:

- different models of tutor support
- staff views on support
- the relationship between retention and support
- the relationship between achievement and support.

The reports were then discussed at a project group meeting and two group members produced the following summary.

- Despite differences between approaches based on a systems model, a qualitative model or a combination, it is possible to identify an underlying general model of support, which can apply for young people and adults. This combines: formal monitoring and follow-up systems; referral and identification of 'at risk' learners; and scope for individual tutors' judgements. However, the relative importance of these factors varies in different organisational contexts.



- Further issues are how far staff feel controlled by the system or have professional discretion; and the relationship between organisational systems and procedures and individual learner support.
- The link between retention and support is complex and may involve factors that staff feel are beyond the control of the tutor.
- Differences in the focus of organisational culture (for example, data or qualitative relationships) may have an impact on retention. The overall organisational culture may impact on student expectations of tutoring and tutor expectations of student support.
- There is an issue concerning the extent to which the results of system change and/or raising awareness of guidance and support impact directly on retention and achievement levels.
- There are different strategies for 14–19 year olds and adults, but there may also be some commonality in the approaches. This is also evident in the open and distance learning model.
- Clarity is needed about tutor role issues (pastoral, academic, information) and whether staff are perceived as the anchor point for students in terms of learner support.
- Student expectations are complex, and role expectations may be different at different levels/with different categories of students.
- Personal and subject tutors act as gateways to other support, but there are differences concerning the point of referral and judgement of appropriateness, in relation to in-college or external support.

### **Models of support**

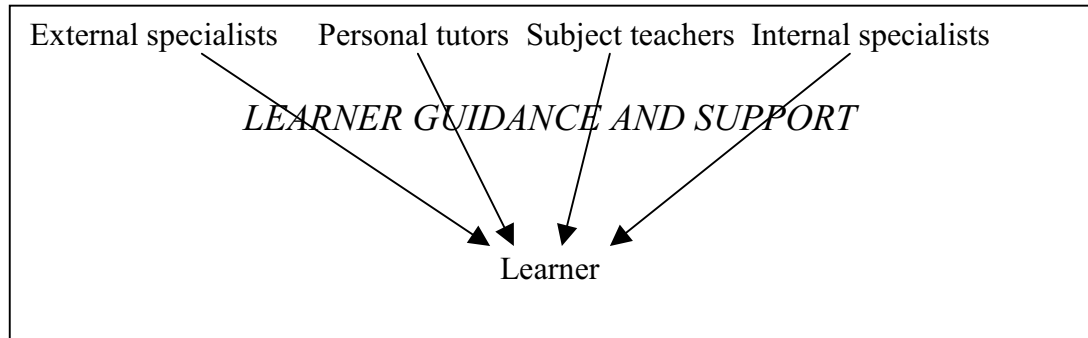
The researcher in each organisation produced a description of the models operating in that organisation, based on an agreed set of guidelines (**Appendix 3**). The researchers accessed a range of sources, which varied between organisations, including:

- policies on learner support and guidance
- policies on tutoring
- student and tutor handbooks
- OFSTED/Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)/Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) inspection reports.

Findings from this exercise informed the next stage of the project. Mapping had revealed wide variation in the models of learner guidance and support, with substantial differences in the way programmes were delivered, and in structures and procedures. The models included:

- those where subject teachers provide guidance and support through acting as personal tutors to their own students
- teachers who act as tutors to students that they do not teach
- specialised non-teaching staff specifically appointed to provide support for learners, such as student support officers working for Student Services
- other non-teaching staff, who may be employed by organisations external to the learning provider, such as careers advisers or counsellors.

### Contributors to learner guidance and support



The role of the personal tutor varied between and sometimes within organisations. The role of the personal tutor might include:

- creating an individual learning plan (ILP), based on an initial assessment report
- liaising with basic skills tutors
- providing induction to the college and a learning programme
- booking students on to a centralised induction programme
- meeting with students, individually and in small groups, to track progress, attendance and achievement towards personal goals
- identifying and supporting students ‘at risk’
- action planning for and supporting the development of key skills
- monitoring progress and achievement of key skills
- liaising with other staff – internal or external specialists, or other subject teachers – on behalf of learners
- evaluating learners’ experiences in line with the organisation’s requirements for monitoring and quality assurance.

There were a considerable number of common issues and themes across the providers, but how they were addressed varied.

- **Policy.** There were variations in both the content of policies concerned with learner guidance and support, and where this issue was addressed. Although some organisations did not have a policy specifically identifiable as learner support, the subject was to be found in several separate policy documents.

- **Targets.** All organisations had targets for retention. However, what this meant in practice varied. In some organisations, individual staff members had clear retention targets, but these were not necessarily linked to how they provided guidance and support.
- **Monitoring.** There were variations in how targets were monitored, and who was responsible for follow-up work with students that might provide guidance and support aimed at improving retention. In some instances, monitoring was the responsibility of a centralised data management unit; in others, it was the responsibility of tutors or subject teachers.
- **Staff support.** The mapping exercise frequently raised the issue of how staff responsible for providing student guidance and support were themselves supported. Such support mostly took the form of in-house staff training and awareness days, and tutor handbooks on services and facilities available for students within the organisation and elsewhere.
- **The tutorial model.** Organisation of the tutorial system within the college was a recurring theme, again with variations between organisations.

### **Interviews with staff**

Interviews were conducted with 4–6 staff in each participating organisation: six senior managers responsible for learner guidance and support; eight middle managers responsible for the delivery of the identified programmes; and nine teaching staff working directly with students on the relevant programmes. The project group member identified appropriate interviewees in their own organisation. To maximise objectivity, none of the researchers conducted interviews in their own organisation. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes. One of the senior managers was interviewed by telephone, and in one instance, staff were seen in pairs.

The themes identified during the previous stage provided the basis for a semi-structured interview developed by two members of the project group. Sample questions were generated for each of the three categories of staff and e-mailed to group members for comments and amendments. A final version was produced for use by the researchers (**Appendix 4**).

### **Analysis of the findings**

Following the interview stage, the project group met to share findings from the wealth of data generated. An analysis of interview data produced several sub-themes (**Appendix 5**). Researchers revisited their findings, which were further analysed. Allocating the content of the interviews to each sub-theme enabled the researchers to draw out ‘messages’ or ‘lessons’ from the project findings as a whole.

## 4 Policy

### Definitions of learner support

All senior managers interviewed made a distinction between *learner* support and *learning* support. The former embraces concepts such as inclusive learning and student entitlement. It is concerned with supporting students on issues that are not necessarily concerned with the learning process (such as financial problems, care responsibilities, transport or health problems). Learning support relates to such things as study skills and basic skills support, and may take place in the classroom or workshop. As one senior manager stated: 'Learner support is for the person, learning support is for the learning process.'

For middle managers and tutors, the difference between learner support and learning support does not seem as clear. One middle manager stated: 'Learner support is everything from initial assessment to the students' achievements.' A tutor defined learner support as: '...holistic support for all of a student's learning through the tutorial system and other means. The whole college is involved in learner support with many different people carrying it out.'

In the HE institution involved, learner support encompasses initial assessment. From the first enquiry, the intention is that students should be placed on the 'right' course. However, academic guidance is regarded as a central plank of learner support, and is provided mainly by associate lecturers.

### The importance of learner support

Most senior managers are clear that incorporating learner support within their organisation's policies and strategic plans is important. 'It is needed to achieve our targets,' stated one. Another admitted: 'It doesn't have the prominence that is needed.' In this instance, take-up of support had decreased, despite attempts to increase it. In the view of senior managers, those who take up learner support are more likely to succeed.

Middle managers reported that they were not aware of the detail of policies concerned with learner support, but expected that these would reflect the content of the strategic plan. They were also aware of the drive within their organisations to improve retention.

Tutors were unfamiliar with policies, and some did not know whether learner support featured in the strategic plan. However, they were familiar with the activities and procedures to deliver learner support. Most tutors see learner support work as concerned with responding to individual student needs rather than with college policies or targets concerned with retention.

Our HE institution certainly sees learner support as important in retention. Its recent projects on retention, which are being disseminated throughout the South West, highlight good practice in learner support.

## Policy and practice

Although senior managers are clear about the importance of learner support, reports from middle managers and tutors suggest that there are some differences in the way the policy is implemented across the institution. The differences relate to how much learner support students receive, and what learner support is used for. One tutor felt that the tutorial system was too often used as part of the disciplinary system. In this context, a middle manager reported: 'Although we have the same goals for all students, we are probably more tolerant of Level 2 students ... they have a longer piece of string.'

Another middle manager suggested that student performance affects the amount of support received: poorly performing students gain more tutorial support.

The amount of time allocated to learner support through tutorials varies both within and between institutions. Direct comparisons are difficult, as allocation is expressed in different ways. In one institution, the senior manager reported that on average, across the college, each student receives 90 minutes of tutorial time a week, either in groups or one-to-one. In another, the figure was two hours per week *per tutor*, with each student getting 10 minutes per term. One tutor stated that each student received seven minutes of one-to-one contact every six weeks.

In practice, these figures are exceeded, although there is no record of the exact amount of time spent. One middle manager felt that the college paid lip service to learner support: 'There is a lot of time spent on it, but it goes unrecognised'.

In the HE institution, the amount of time allocated to tutorials was recommended centrally, although how this was distributed to students locally was determined within each region. Each course has a notional number of tutorial hours allocated to it, but how this is provided varies between programmes; for example, one-to-one, group tutorials, day schools, electronic or telephone contact and, very occasionally, videoconferencing.

## 5 Targets

### Use of targets

In two institutions, senior managers reported generic targets for retention and achievement across the institution. The target for retention in both organisations is 80%. Targets exist in the remaining institutions, but are not yet used in all programmes. One senior manager commented: 'Staff are expected to take account of targets, but they are not yet embedded into the psychology of the college.' Where programme targets exist, they are set and agreed between programme managers and programme or course teams. Senior managers see targets as important. 'Retention is something that can alert you to the fact that there is something wrong on a course,' stated one senior manager.

Targets are used during course reviews and in self-assessment and development plans. Some programme areas in some institutions are starting to use national benchmarks to develop their targets. However, in many areas, targets are based on internal reviews that relate to the previous year's programmes.

Middle managers were aware of retention targets, but tutors expressed very little awareness of them and how they were set. One tutor commented cynically on the use of targets: '[We] keep our fingers crossed ... they are used to bully us.'

Staff at the HE institution have targets for both recruitment and retention, and the institution is under pressure from government to increase the number of new students (as opposed to recruiting past students). Central targets are allocated to regions, which then work to meet them.

### Targets and student needs

Staff at all levels in the organisations recognised the limitations of institution-wide targets. One senior manager commented: 'When [targets] are aggregated across college, they become bland figures and don't relate to individual student needs.' Tutors in all institutions showed little awareness of targets and how they were set. Some expressed scepticism about their usefulness. One felt that because the student population changed so much from year to year, it was impossible to compare cohorts.

Tutors from different organisations noted the tension between trying to improve retention and achievement, and the interests and needs of students. If tutors feel it is in a student's interest to leave a course or change to a different programme, they would not try to prevent it. The interests of the student always come first. Similarly, if a student is benefiting from a programme, but is unlikely to achieve (in college funding terms), they would encourage the student to stay on the programme. 'I would hope to lose no one,' stated one tutor, 'I'm student-centred, not figures-centred'.

The same view was found in the HE institution: '[The] tutors' concern is to advise what is best for individual students and [they] should not be prejudiced by targets,' commented an HE institution middle manager.

## 6 Monitoring

Interviews with senior managers confirmed that the process of monitoring student attendance varies between institutions. One organisation has appointed two attendance officers for full-time students, and one for part-timers. They receive messages from absent students, check registers for unexplained or excessive absences, and follow up unexplained absences by telephoning students at home and informing tutors of the outcomes. A system of 'cause for concern' notes operates between these officers and tutors, and tutors may be expected to follow up the reasons for a student's absence. Where a part-time student does not have a tutor, the responsibility to follow up absences falls to the subject teacher.

Another institution has set up an Achievement Unit, whose staff not only follow up absences and liaise with tutors to monitor attendance, but also monitor students' progression routes when they have left the college. In a third, a college-wide documentation system is being put in place, with absences followed up by student support officers appointed to programme areas where there is concern about retention. One organisation has appointed student advisers from ethnic minority backgrounds to address issues of retention among similar groups of students.

Much of the provision at the HE institution is delivered by distance learning and face-to-face contact is optional, so non-attendance at tutorials cannot be used as a method of monitoring. However, lack of contact with tutors can be monitored. It is the associate lecturer's responsibility to follow up if a piece of work is not handed in on time. A current project aims to identify students who are at risk of dropping out prior to their starting a programme.

Middle managers and tutors were aware of their organisations' monitoring procedures, but also spoke frequently about informal systems of monitoring. Clearly, staff see a significant part of monitoring as 'policing' student attendance. One middle manager noted that students do not see the use of 'concern notes' as a cause for concern: 'They see it as being dropped in it!' Another felt that telephoning students at home 'acts as a stick for motivated students who just fancy a day off'. Another said: 'Sometimes the very act of coming to see me can improve things.'

Some tutors, however, experience a tension between meeting individual student needs and maintaining the formal system of attendance monitoring. A tutor stated: 'A third of my students are regular attenders, a third have odd lapses, and another third have lots of lapses. I see them as individuals ... and [try to] find out why they have lapsed.'

There is a commonly held view that systems can get in the way of supporting students: 'Completing forms and ILPs [individual learning plans] can become the object of the exercise. Tutors need the freedom to respond to students' needs as opposed to doing what the handbook tells them to do.'



Staff at all levels recognised that reasons for drop-out are varied and may relate to other aspects of guidance and support provision. Students at the HE institution in the project sometimes have a particular need in terms of motivation to continue. The programmes for which they register can take as long as six years. Their motivation to continue studying is seen as essential, and avoiding a feeling of failure is viewed as paramount.

In one college, a middle manager related the issue to initial assessment:

*[Poor attendance] is a symptom rather than a disease ... a sign that a student is not happy ... I rarely find that they are not coping but they want to. It's more often that they are not coping with the work because they never wanted to be here in the first place.*

A tutor referred to the lifestyle of many students and the importance (or lack of it) attached to their college programme:

*There is a growing trend that students aren't prioritising their college work any more. Their paid work impinges on this to a growing extent ... reasons for lateness and non-attendance have a lot to do with their outside life. So it's trying to steer a mid-line somewhere between their needs and your needs. If you scream too loudly, you'll lose them. They'll go somewhere else where life is easier.*

Another commented: 'If they perceive they are being policed, they will look for a way out.'

## 7 Support for staff

Senior managers in all organisations commented on the range of support available to staff, including workshops, staff development programmes, a tutors' handbook, staff manuals, and support through the organisation's intranet.

In some organisations, a network of tutors meets to disseminate information and share experiences. In one college, the local Connexions adviser has contributed to this network and has provided staff workshops on working with difficult students. Support is available for all full-time and part-time staff, provided they are teaching on full-time programmes. This support is not usually available to those who teach on part-time programmes. In any case, part-time staff would not be paid for their attendance at a workshop or development event.

The content of staff handbooks varies between organisations, and there appears to be little consensus among tutors and middle managers on their usefulness. One tutor commented that the staff handbook was far too detailed to be of much use; another knew it existed, but 'wasn't sure if it covered learner support'. A third found it useful, as it included exercises and activities to do with students during tutorial times. The university's handbook contains samples of all documentation to be used with students.

A recurring theme from interviews in all institutions was the importance of networking with other colleagues. 'The most useful development comes from other colleagues informally,' said one middle manager. A tutor commented: 'Tutors who have been in college several years see their close working relationship with colleagues across the college as beneficial to students, enabling them to access support quickly.'

In one college, there was a perception that staff development provision did not focus on learner support, but this was provided for through personal contact with other colleagues. In the HE institution, personal support for staff has been formalised, with mentors provided for all new staff. Associate lecturers can also call on a team of staff tutors for support.

Several tutors commented on the lack of time for development activities. 'Reflective time is what is missing,' stated one. One part-time tutor preferred to refer to a colleague rather than use a staff handbook or manual about an aspect of work.

## 8 Models of tutoring

The tutorial model used may vary between programme areas, and no one model is used throughout the organisation. Senior managers report current developments in the model of tutoring used in their organisations, including the appointment of student advisers and support staff to work with particular groups of students (such as ethnic minority students), or with particular programmes (such as those with poor retention figures).

In one of the colleges, a policy on addressing progression in the tutorial system is in development. In another, current tutorial provision is for the 16–19-year-old cohort; provision for adults is in development. Another college has no standard ILP in use throughout the college. There is particular support available in the HE institution for disabled students.

Tutorial support is a mixture of one-to-one and group work. The proportion of each varies between organisations and sometimes between years of the same programme. For example, on one programme, the ratio of time spent between one-to-one sessions and group work is 50:50 in the first year, and 75:25 in the second.

Tutorial support that is independent of teachers is recognised as important. ‘Students like the impartiality of tutoring from someone who is not teaching them,’ stated one senior manager. However, there is some evidence that only full-time students receive such support; often, part-time students receive support only from their subject teachers. There is some suggestion that those students aged 19 plus receive different, and sometimes less, tutorial support than those aged 16–19.

### What happens in tutorials?

Middle managers report a range of activities during tutorials. These include key skills development and portfolio building (for 16–19 year olds), and developing group cohesion. In some A-level programmes, tutorials are the only time a group of students will meet each other. For some middle managers, there are clear disciplinary purposes to their role. One reported:

*There are three reasons for seeing students:*

- *the disciplinary process has been invoked*
- *sometimes a student prefers to see me rather than the tutor*
- *to give a ‘shot across the bows’.*

Another felt it was important to present the tutorial process as a useful activity to support students, and not as a remedial tool.

One middle manager reported on the generic nature of the tutor role. Tutors may make referrals to other internal or external organisations. They act as a hub and may broker support, as well as deal with difficulties themselves: ‘If there are gaps [in support] it’s to do with the capabilities of the tutor.’

Some middle managers make a distinction between the support needed by 16–19 year olds, and that needed by adults (over 19). One tutor underlined the importance of recognising the independence of mature students and their right to choose what they do in tutorials. Another felt that the distinction between academic support and pastoral support is less relevant for adult students.

### **Tutors' views of their role**

Throughout the interviews, tutors in all organisations repeatedly referred to the importance of students' needs. Tutors see their role as concerned with meeting these needs, rather than meeting the 'system' needs of their organisation. One tutor stated: 'Tutors are largely student-centred and sometimes resent systems which require them to record everything, complete ILPs, gather evidence for key skills.'

In another organisation, a tutor commented that the 'philosophy seems to be that tutoring is about discipline and maintaining statistics, rather than a pastoral model'. The same tutor referred to the approach as feeling like a 'deficit' model, concerned with remedying failures or problems, rather than building on strengths.

Another issue, mentioned frequently in all organisations, was the need for flexibility from both tutors and 'the system': 'The college cannot impose a system for tutorials as this will not meet individual needs – we've tried it and it didn't work.'

In contrast, a senior manager – who had 'seen it elsewhere' – reported that there is no centrally driven tutorial system, saying that 'the teaching staff hate it, the students love it'.

Flexibility in the system does not refer simply to the content of tutorials, but also to who are involved as tutors. One tutor felt there should be a mix of men and women in the tutor role, and as previously mentioned, one organisation has appointed advisers from ethnic minority groups to work with that group of students.

## 9 Evaluative comments

All interviewees were asked if they felt that learner support had an impact on the retention of students. Their responses suggest a belief that it does have an impact on retention, but that this is difficult to demonstrate, particularly across an organisation. The responses raised the following issues:

### ***‘Student needs determine the support offered, not the retention targets.’***

This statement from a senior manager reflects the tension between meeting the needs of individual students and meeting the needs of the organisation. At individual student level, it may be possible to show that learner support has had an effect on retention. Showing this across the organisation is more difficult, due to the many variables that contribute to retention figures and the variations in learner support in responding to individual needs. As one middle manager expressed it: ‘Focused learner support can be seen to have an impact on retention ... but it’s more difficult to show the impact on the main site.’

Staff at the HE institution were adamant that learner support affects retention positively. The evidence comes from letters that the HE institution receives from students affirming that [staff] interventions have helped them get where they are.

### ***Unreliable feedback from students***

Although all interviewees reported that students generally provided positive feedback of their experiences of learner support, the view was expressed that this is sometimes the result of ‘tick box surveys’, which, by implication, students do not take seriously.

### ***Differences in the take-up of learner support***

Staff feel that there are differences in the take-up of learner support by different groups of students. Younger students often see learner support as remedial, and therefore do not accept it. Mature students are more ready to accept it.

### ***The role of learner support in helping progression***

This issue has already been referred to. One senior manager felt that learner support was more effective in aiding progression to higher education than progression to employment.

### ***The tutor’s relationship with the students***

Tutors frequently referred to the importance of the tutor’s relationship with the students, as well as the contacts they maintained with colleagues, to provide effective learner support. The HE institution sees the tutor’s relationship with students as a particular strength. Telephone support both from tutors and the local regional support team are seen as especially effective.

### ***Support for staff***

This was seen by the HE institution as another strength, provided through the staff tutor team and through documentation.

## **10 Conclusions**

### **Views of staff**

- All staff express a strong commitment to learner support. Staff with a tutoring role are very aware of the impact of ‘pastoral’ issues on student retention and achievement.
- Staff believe that the provision of learner support affects retention rates, but presented little evidence of the impact.
- All staff refer to the importance of being student-centred. Where it is not in the interests of a particular student to remain on a programme, they would not encourage them to do so.
- Staff reported a tension between the aims of strategies to support learners, and the aims of strategies to improve retention. For example, students who are under-performing on a particular programme might well be advised by their tutor to transfer to another, or even change their learning provider. This conflicts with retention strategies that seek to keep students on their programme ‘at all costs’.

### **Managing learner support**

- Across all organisations, there are a variety of models of learner support. These include tutors who do not teach their students, tutors who do teach their students, and non-teaching staff who support students (for example, careers advisers, counsellors, student advisers). In some instances, models of support vary within the organisation.
- Some organisations have set up specific administrative units to track and follow up student attendance. These units sometimes use specific systems to improve retention, such as ‘cause for concern’ notes and contracts of attendance. These are regarded as an aspect of learner support.
- There is some evidence of targeted use of learner support to increase retention (such as support on Level 2 programmes, and ethnic minority student advisers).
- Staff state that the provision of learner support is not universal; some students get more than others, and mature students often receive the least. There are variations between programmes, and even within the same organisation.
- There is little evidence of any approaches to evaluating learner support and its impact.

### **Features of learner support**

- Staff see the needs of adults as different from the needs of 16–19-year-old students, and this affects the way that learner support is provided to adults.
- Staff are aware of the fine balance between proactive support and interference with adult students. They are also aware of the potential conflict between tutoring to support retention and the right of choice of individual students. This may have implications for initial assessment and guidance.
- For both staff and students, part-time status has a negative impact on how much support is received. Staff in the colleges state that part-time students receive less learner support than full-time students, and part-time staff receive less support than full-time staff for their role as tutors.

### **Staff awareness**

- Staff generally are aware of the importance of retention, although they are often unaware of specific details such as targets for retention and achievement.
- Staff showed little awareness of their organisation's policies on learner support.
- Other than senior managers, staff awareness of targets for retention was low.
- Although some institutions have the intention of providing a unified learner support system throughout their organisation, staff are not always aware of this. Nor are they always aware of how they should use it.
- In some organisations, the managers themselves do not appear to be aware of the goals of the learner support systems.

### **Support for staff**

- Staff consider staff development an important issue in the context of learner support.
- Organisations' support in terms of staff development for learner support appeared limited, but staff have developed internal networks and communication channels that were helpful in providing effective learner support. Staff support for tutors at the HE institution is more structured than that of the other learning providers in the project.

- Although there appears to be a variety of methods to support staff in their work, staff frequently commented that they have too little time to participate in development activities, or to reflect on their work.
- Communication between staff is seen as important in supporting tutors' learner support roles.
- Part-time staff can be left out, because of inflexible delivery of the support.



## **11 Recommendations**

1. There is a need for further research that describes the different models of learner support, and for research to test the effectiveness of specific strategies to support students.
2. Further research is needed to explore the relationship between learner support and retention.
3. Access to learner support for part-time learners and some adults should be increased to the equivalent of that provided for full-time students.
4. Part-time staff in the colleges should have greater access to the support available to full-time staff by removing barriers such as lack of payment for attending sessions and inconvenient scheduling.
5. In providing support for staff, use should be made of existing informal networks and communication among staff.

## Appendix 1: Detailed methodology

Four colleges of further education and one HE institution agreed to take part in the project.

A senior manager in each organisation sanctioned their participation, and identified the programme areas in which the project would take place within their own college. The range of programme areas selected by the participating learning providers included:

- AS/A-levels
- humanities
- health and social care
- Access programmes.

The choice of areas reflected the priorities of the individual learning providers.

A project group was established to steer the project forward and this was attended by those conducting the research in each organisation as well as the regional director for the LSDA in the South West, and an LSDA development adviser. The project group met on five occasions (as at 6 August 2002) to review the progress of the project and to develop the detail of the next stages. Individual planning group members also met with each other outside these meetings and communicated by telephone and e-mail. The project group also reported to the wider WoE LSRN group meetings that take place every three months. Those attending these meetings also contributed their ideas and views.

The project specification identified the following methods that would be used during the project:

- a literature search which would include the identification of the key features affecting retention
- a mapping of the models of guidance and support used by subject-based lecturers and teachers in each organisation
- a survey of teaching staff and managers' views using semi-structured interviews
- analysis of the findings
- production of the report.

The time frame for completing these activities was developed by the project group as follows:

<b>Phase 1</b> literature review	By 11 March 2002
<b>Phase 2</b> description of models	4–22 March 2002
<b>Phase 3</b> interviews with staff	8 April–31 May 2002
<b>Phase 4</b> analysis of findings	June–July 2002
<b>Phase 5</b> production of report	By 31 July 2002

## **Literature review**

Members of the project group and members of the local network conducted a literature review. The whole group identified sources which they were aware were likely to inform the project's development. Some members agreed to identify further sources through libraries to which they had access and through the internet. Documents were obtained through the LSDA and distributed to those agreeing to participate in the review process. Network members took one document each and produced a short report which responded to the following questions: What does this document tell us about:

- different models of tutor support?
- staff views on support?
- the relationship between retention and support?
- the relationship between achievement and support?

These reports were then discussed at a project group meeting and two group members agreed to produce a summary document on the findings.

## **Description of models of support**

The researcher in each organisation agreed to produce a description of the models of learner support that operated in their own organisation in the context where the research would take place. This was achieved through the project group agreeing a set of guidelines for the description that the researchers would use. These guidelines are attached as **Appendix 3**.

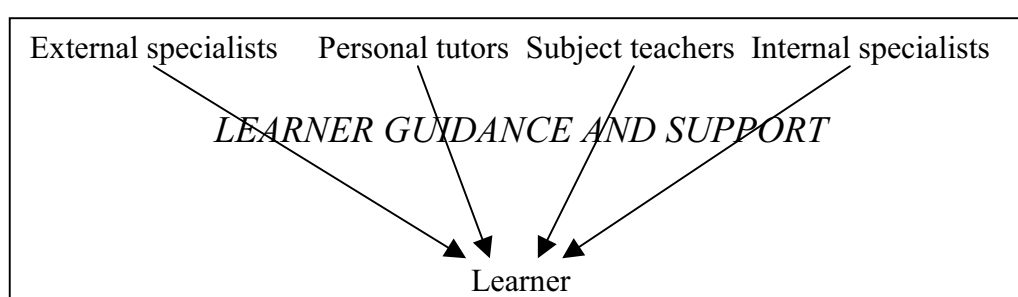
Researchers accessed a range of sources within each organisation. These sources inevitably varied between organisations due to their structural and procedural differences. They included, for example:

- policies on learner support and guidance
- policies on tutoring
- student and tutor handbooks
- OFSTED/ALI/FEFC and QAA inspection reports.

In one instance, the researcher interviewed key staff concerned with learner support. In another organisation, this mapping of the model of learner support proved particularly difficult. The institution had recently merged with a neighbouring organisation and the policies and practices that applied were in a state of change. In theory, the ways of the new organisation were in place, yet the practices were those of the old. Inspection reports related to the old organisation, and although reports existed for the new organisation, they did not include the work of what had become a new campus.

Having conducted this exercise, the project group met to share their findings in order to inform the next stage of the project. This mapping of the models of learner support revealed wide variations in the models of learner guidance and support. This demonstrated substantial differences in the way that programmes were delivered to learners, as well as differences in the organisations' structures and procedures. The models of support included those where subject teachers provide guidance and support through acting as personal tutors to their own students; teachers who act as tutors to students that they do not teach; specialised non-teaching staff specifically appointed to provide support for learners, such as student support officers working for Student Services; and other non-teaching staff, who may be employed by organisations external to the learning provider such as careers advisers or counsellors.

### Contributors to learner guidance and support



The role of the personal tutor varied between organisations, and sometimes within the organisation itself. The following box includes the range of activities they might undertake:

The role of the personal tutor might include:

- creating an individual learning plan (ILP), based on an initial assessment report
- liaising with basic skills tutors
- providing induction to the college and a learning programme
- booking students on to a centralised induction programme
- meeting with students both individually and in small groups to track progress, attendance and achievement towards personal goals
- identifying and supporting students 'at risk'
- action planning for and supporting the development of key skills
- monitoring progress and achievement of key skills
- liaising with other staff on behalf of learners, be they internal or external specialists, or other subject teachers
- evaluating learners' experiences in line with the organisation's requirements for monitoring and quality assurance.

Common issues or themes were identified, but how these were addressed varied. The common issues and themes that arose were considerable across the providers:

- **Policy.** There were variations in both the content of policies concerned with learner guidance and support, as well as where the issue of learner guidance and support was addressed. Some organisations did not have a policy specifically identifiable as learner support. However, this did not mean that it was not addressed. Rather, the subject was to be found in several separate policy documents.
- **Targets.** All organisations had targets for retention. However, what this meant in practice varied. In some organisations, individual staff members had clear targets to achieve that concerned retention, although this was not necessarily linked to how they provided learner guidance and support.
- **Monitoring.** There were variations in terms of how these targets were monitored, and who was responsible for the follow-up work with students which might provide guidance and support, and thereby attempt to improve retention. In some instances, it was the responsibility of a centralised data management unit; whereas in others, it was the responsibility of either tutors or subject teachers to monitor retention.
- **Staff support.** The mapping exercise frequently raised the issue of how staff were supported in their responsibility to provide guidance and support for students. This support mostly took the form of in-house staff training and awareness days, as well as the provision of tutor handbooks to inform them of the services and facilities available for students within and outside their organisation.
- **The tutorial model itself.** Lastly, the organisation of the tutorial system within the college was a recurring theme, and again there were variations between organisations as to how this was effected.

### Interviews with staff

Each of the researchers in the project group agreed to conduct interviews with staff in participating organisations. These staff were drawn from senior managers responsible for learner guidance and support, middle managers responsible for the delivery of the identified programmes, and teaching staff working directly with students on the relevant programmes. Each project group member identified appropriate interviewees in their own organisation. Between four and six staff were seen in each organisation, with a total of 23 being interviewed by the project overall. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. In one instance, one of the senior managers was interviewed by telephone, due to unavoidable circumstances, and in one instance, staff were seen in pairs.

Staff interviewed	Number of interviews
Senior managers	6
Middle managers/programme leaders	8
Lecturers/teachers/tutors	9

It was agreed that each researcher would not conduct interviews in her/his own organisation. This approach aimed to maximise objectivity in the interviewing process by avoiding situations where a ‘history’ might influence what was said, and avoiding the researcher feeling compromised should an interviewee find difficulty with some of the questions. Researchers were allocated an organisation in which they would work. There were no ‘reciprocal pairs’, so the following box shows the plan for the interviews:

Researcher from organisation A interviewed in organisation B
Researcher from organisation B interviewed in organisation C
Researcher from organisation C interviewed in organisation D
Researcher from organisation D interviewed in organisation E
Researcher from organisation E interviewed in organisation A

The themes identified during the previous stage provided the basis for a semi-structured interview *proforma* that was developed by two of the project group members. Sample questions were generated for each of the three categories of staff and e-mailed to group members for comments and amendments. A final version was produced for use by the researchers (see **Appendix 3**).

### **Analysis of the findings**

Following the interview stage, the project group met to share their findings. The wealth of data that the process had generated required some rationalisation for the reporting procedure. A first attempt at a content analysis of the interviews produced a number of items within each theme. These are provided in **Appendix 4**. Researchers agreed to review their interview reports and classify their findings according to each item. These were then sent to two of the project group for further analysis. Allocation of the content of the interviews to each item then enabled the researchers to draw out ‘messages’ or ‘lessons’ from the project findings as a whole.

## Appendix 2: Literature reviewed

Comptroller and Auditor General (2001). *Improving student performance: how English FE colleges can improve student retention and achievement*. HMSO.

DfES (2001). *Connexions Service business planning guidance*. The Stationery Office.

DfES (2002). *Connexions Service in colleges*. The Stationery Office.

Green M (2001). *Raising quality and achievement best practice strand*. Paper prepared for expert seminar on 'Improving the quality of individual tutorials', 21 October 2001. LSDA.

Green M (2001). *Successful tutoring – good practice for managers and tutors*. LSDA.

Hall JC (2001). *Retention and wastage in FE & HE*. Scottish Council for Research in Education .

Martinez P (1997). *Improving student retention: a guide to successful strategies*. LSDA.

Martinez P (2001a). *Great expectations. Setting targets for students*. LSDA.

Martinez P (2001b). *Improving student retention and achievement – what do we know and what do we need to find out?* LSDA.

Martinez P (2001c). *Support for success*. Unpublished discussion paper. LSDA.

Martinez P (2002). *Raising achievement at Levels 1 and 2*. LSDA.

Martinez P and Munday F (1998). *9000 voices: student persistence and drop-out in further education*. FEDA. At <http://www.lsda.org.uk/files/pdf/ISSN14607034-3.pdf>.

Spours K (1997). Issues of student retention: an initial study of staff perceptions. *Research in Post-compulsory Education*, 2(2), 109–119.

### **Appendix 3: Describing the model of learner support in programme areas. An outline framework for our descriptions**

We suggest we cover the following issues:

#### **Systems**

- Is there a college policy for learner support? What does it say?
- How is learner support organised?
- Who is responsible for what?
- Is there a diagram to show lines of responsibility for learner support?
- What systems are in place for learner support? For example:
  - initial guidance and diagnostic assessment
  - ‘at risk’ assessment, initial and/or on programme
  - mid- and end of programme evaluation
  - attendance and progress review
  - frequency of tutorials: are these one-to-one or in groups? What is the average group size?
  - what in-class support is provided?
  - what learning plans are produced and how are they used?

#### **Quality issues**

- What actions are taken to improve the quality of learner support? Examples might be:
  - staff training events
  - peer/colleague observation/feedback
  - student charters
  - materials available to staff (eg tutor handbook).
- How are staff identified or selected to be tutors? Is there a job/role description or specification?



## Appendix 4: Interview results summary form

Theme		Senior managers	Middle managers	Tutors
Personal definition of learner support				
1: Policy	1.1	How, and to what extent does learner support feature in the college's strategic plan?	How, and to what extent does learner support feature in the college's strategic plan?	How, and to what extent does learner support feature in the college's strategic plan?
	1.2	How and to what extent does the design of your learner support take account of goals for the improvement/maintenance of retention (mix of level and type of course etc)?	How and to what extent does the design of your learner support take account of goals for the improvement/maintenance of retention (mix of level and type of course etc)?	
	1.3	Which of your policies provide guidance for the implementation of learner support?	Which of your policies provide guidance for the implementation of learner support? What do they say?	Which of your policies provide guidance for the implementation of learner support? What do they say?

<b>2: Targets</b>	<b>2.1</b>	What, if any, targets are staff expected to meet in relation to student retention?	What, if any, targets are staff expected to meet in relation to student retention?	Do you have targets for retention? What are they?
	<b>2.2</b>	How are these targets arrived at?	How are these targets arrived at?	How are these targets arrived at?
	<b>2.3</b>	How are the targets used?	How are the targets used?	How are the targets used?
<b>3: Monitoring</b>	<b>3</b>	What steps are taken to ensure early and effective follow-up of absence and backlogs/failure in coursework/assessments?	What steps are taken to ensure early and effective follow-up of absence and backlogs/failure in coursework/assessments?	What steps are taken to ensure early and effective follow-up of absence and backlogs/failure in coursework/assessments?
<b>4: Staff support</b>	<b>4.1</b>	What support is provided to full-time staff to enable them to provide learner support?	What support is provided to full-time staff to enable them to provide learner support?	What support is provided to full-time staff to enable them to provide learner support?
	<b>4.2</b>	And is the support provided to part-time staff likely to differ in any way?	And is the support provided to part-time staff likely to differ in any way?	And is the support provided to part-time staff likely to differ in any way?
	<b>4.3</b>	What cross-institutional support is available for tutors on learner support? [Prompts if needed: handbook, staff development programme, intranet]	In what ways does the college provide you with support in supporting learners? [Prompts if needed: handbook, staff development programme, intranet]	In what ways does the college provide you with support in supporting learners? [Prompts if needed: handbook, staff development programme, intranet]
	<b>4.1</b>	In your view, which of these is particularly useful? And not particularly useful?	In your view, which of these is particularly useful? And not particularly useful?	In your view, which of these is particularly useful? And not particularly useful?

<b>5: Tutorial model</b>	<b>5.1</b>	What kind of tutorial arrangements exist?  How much time within them is given to the consideration of individual student progress in their course?	What kind of tutorial arrangements exist?  How much time within them is given to the consideration of individual student progress in their course?	What kind of tutorial arrangements exist?  How much time within them is given to the consideration of individual student progress in their course?
	<b>5.2</b>	To what extent is the learner support model about tackling students' difficulties?	To what extent is the learner support model about tackling students' difficulties?	To what extent is the learner support model about tackling students' difficulties?
	<b>5.3</b>	Is there an adequate balance and appropriate links between tutorial support for academic progress and pastoral care – including support from Student Services?	Is there an adequate balance and appropriate links between tutorial support for academic progress and pastoral care – including support from Student Services?	Is there an adequate balance and appropriate links between tutorial support for academic progress and pastoral care – including support from Student Services?
<b>6: Evaluative views</b>	<b>6.1</b>	What do you consider to be the strengths of your learner support provision?	What do you consider to be the strengths of your learner support provision?	What do you consider to be the strengths of your learner support provision?
	<b>6.2</b>	Are there any aspects of learner support which are difficult to fulfil?	Are there any aspects of learner support which are difficult to fulfil?	Are there any aspects of learner support which are difficult to fulfil?
	<b>6.3</b>	How might the provision be improved?	How might the provision be improved?	How might the provision be improved?
	<b>6.4</b>	What, if any, impact does your learner support have on student retention?  What evidence is there to support this view?	What, if any, impact does your learner support have on student retention?  What evidence is there to support this view?	What, if any, impact does your learner support have on student retention?  What evidence is there to support this view?

## **Appendix 5: Issues arising from interviews**

### **1. Policy**

#### Senior managers

- 1.1 Make own policy, development of policy
- 1.2 Conscious of need for learner support
- 1.3 There are clear policies for retention/achievement
- 1.4 Definition of learner support
- 1.5 Distinctions between learner support and learning support
- 1.6 Increasing learner support take-up
- 1.7 Links to strategic plan

#### Middle managers

- 1.8 Putting policy into practice/variations by level
- 1.9 Policy awareness
- 1.10 Is it important? Valued?

#### Tutors

- 1.11 Perceptions of policy/ownership of policy/communications with managers
- 1.12 Use/non-use of policy

### **2. Targets**

#### Senior managers

- 2.1 Extent/range of use
- 2.2 Targets versus student needs
- 2.3 Review processes as means to monitor/achieve targets
- 2.4 Use of national benchmarks
- 2.5 Use of internal targets/programme targets

#### Middle managers

- 2.6 Use of targets versus student need

#### Tutors

- 2.7 Awareness of targets
- 2.8 Use of targets

### **3. Monitoring**

#### Senior managers

- 3.1 Process – how it happens
- 3.2 Formality
  - informal
  - formal
- 3.3 Active/reactive staff responses
- 3.4 College-wide systems versus departmental systems

#### Middle managers

- 3.5 Responsibilities for monitoring
- 3.6 Systems/processes/documents for monitoring
- 3.7 Understanding/interpreting information
- 3.8 Style of monitoring – formal/informal/integrated

#### Tutors

- 3.9 Systems versus professional judgement
- 3.10 Personal style of monitoring (policing versus support)
- 3.11 Importance of learner support

### **4. Staff support**

#### Senior managers

- 4.1 Availability of training
- 4.2 Means of training
- 4.3 Stage of development – sophistication
- 4.4 What's available
- 4.5 Specialist versus general support

#### Middle managers

- 4.6 Availability and sources of staff support
- 4.7 Internal networking
- 4.8 Links to tutorial system

#### Tutors

- 4.9 Internal networking
- 4.10 Support activities undertaken
- 4.11 Use of handbooks etc
- 4.12 Part-timers/full-timers
- 4.13 Paper/policy versus practice

## **5. Tutorial model**

### Senior managers

- 5.1 Change and development
- 5.2 One system or lots
- 5.3 Consistency across college
- 5.4 Student allocation (time)

### Middle managers

- 5.5 What's the purpose, and what happens
- 5.6 Tutor role (eg referral point)
- 5.7 No separate learner support role
- 5.8 System (eg centralised)

### Tutors

- 5.9 Understanding of tutor role
- 5.10 What's imposed on role – being in control
- 5.11 System versus student-centred approach
- 5.12 Flexibility of tutorial model

## **6. Evaluative view**

### Senior managers

- 6.1 Retention versus student need
- 6.2 Retention and its impact on achievement
- 6.3 Feedback from students on learning support

### Middle managers

- 6.4 Learning support and progression

### Tutors

- 6.5 Feedback from students on learner support
- 6.6 Student acceptance of learner support
- 6.7 Strengths of learner support (lies in people)
- 6.8 Communication between staff
- 6.9 Accessibility of learner support – environment

